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SUBJECT: MOFAT NORTHEAST ASIA DG ON ROK TIES WITH CHINA,
JAPAN AND MONGOLIA

REF: SEOUL 1531

Classified By: DCM Mark Tokola. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) During a November 12 lunch with the DCM, MOFAT Northeast Asia Division Director General Cho Tai-young stressed that the ROK's trade and people-to-people ties with the PRC continue to expand rapidly. Cho cautioned, however, that the expanding relationship with Beijing had begun to "set off alarm bells" in Seoul, with some prominent think-tankers and National Assembly members urging the Blue House to proceed more cautiously with the PRC. This was particularly true with regard to a possible FTA with Beijing.

The Japanese government continued to stall on whether Emperor Akihito would visit Seoul in 2010, the 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of Korea. DG Cho warned that a visit by President Obama to Hiroshima next year would likely increase friction between Tokyo and Seoul; high-profile moves by the Japanese to portray themselves as WWII victims would play badly here. Cho's division has been tasked by the Blue House to find ways to strengthen ROK relations with Mongolia. End summary.

Northeast Asia DG On: Seoul-Beijing Relationship...

¶2. (C) During a November 12 lunch hosted by the DCM, MOFAT Northeast Asia Division Director General Cho Tai-young reviewed with us some of the front-burner issues in ROK relations with the three countries in his portfolio: China, Japan and Mongolia. (Note: DG Cho's office does not handle anything related to the North Korean nuclear issue. End note.)

¶3. (C) Reiterating points he has made to us previously (reftel), Cho said the ROK's trade and people-to-people ties with the PRC continue to expand rapidly. In fact, the value of 2009 ROK-China trade was set to equal or exceed the combined total value of 2009 ROK-Japan and ROK-U.S. trade. In addition, he said, there are now nearly 100,000 ROK citizens living, working and/or studying in the PRC. MOFAT was shifting resources to cope with, among other things, increasing demand for consular services. Cho related that MOFAT was preparing to open the seventh ROK consulate in the PRC, in Wuhan, and was training and recruiting large numbers of Mandarin speakers.

¶4. (C) Cho was less sanguine about the ROK's evolving political relationship with Beijing, though he said Presidents Hu and Lee have an "excellent" personal relationship. Broadly speaking, the DG said, the rapid

expansion of trade ties and the perception of stronger political ties between Seoul and Beijing had begun to set off alarm bells in some segments of ROK society. The Blue House was increasingly hearing concerns from prominent, pro-American academics, think-tankers and National Assembly members about the need to proceed more cautiously with the PRC. This was particularly true with regard to the possibility of concluding an FTA with China, which Cho saw as Beijing's top priority with Seoul.

...An Emperor Visit in 2010....

¶15. (C) Turning to Japan, Cho said there has still been no official reaction to President Lee's public reiteration of his invitation to have Emperor Akihito visit Seoul. The Japanese government was stalling, unconvinced by private ROKG pledges to ensure the safety of the emperor and temper negative Korean press coverage of the visit. The DG cautioned that a visit by President Obama to Hiroshima next year would likely cause turbulence in Seoul's relationship with Tokyo. Any high-profile moves by the Japanese to portray themselves as WWII victims would play badly in South Korea and China. (Comment: Japanese Embassy colleagues here have groused that the ROKG effort to secure an emperor visit was "not helped" by the centrally-located Ministry of Culture, which recently displayed a building-length banner hailing nationalist hero An Jung-geun as a "true patriot" for assassinating Japanese Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi in 1909. End comment.)

...and "Undisciplined" Mongolians

¶16. (SBU) Cho related that he has been tasked by the Blue House to strengthen the ROK's relations with Mongolia. The Mongolians had initially proposed a broad economic agreement permitting the free movement of labor, goods and capital, which the DG characterized as "too ambitious." Cho said there are about 35,000 Mongolians living in the ROK but added that South Korean companies are not keen on hiring them because they find Mongolian workers "undisciplined."

STEPHENS